Regeneration Precedes Faith

by R. C. Sproul

One of the most dramatic moments in my life for the shaping of my theology took place in a seminary classroom. One of my professors went to the blackboard and wrote these words in bold letters: "Regeneration Precedes Faith."

These words were a shock to my system. I had entered seminary believing that the key work of man to effect rebirth was faith. I thought that we first had to believe in Christ in order to be born again. I use the words in order here for a reason. I was thinking in terms of steps that must be taken in a certain sequence. I had put faith at the beginning. The order looked something like this:

"Faith - rebirth -justification."

I hadn't thought that matter through very carefully. Nor had I listened carefully to Jesus' words to Nicodemus. I assumed that even though I was a sinner, a person born of the flesh and living in the flesh, I still had a little island of righteousness, a tiny deposit of spiritual power left within my soul to enable me to respond to the Gospel on my own. Perhaps I had been confused by the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Rome, and many other branches of Christendom, had taught that regeneration is gracious; it cannot happen apart from the help of God.

No man has the power to raise himself from spiritual death. Divine assistance is necessary. This grace, according to Rome, comes in the form of what is called prevenient grace. "Prevenient" means that which comes from something else. Rome adds to this prevenient grace the requirement that we must "cooperate with it and assent to it" before it can take hold in our hearts.

This concept of cooperation is at best a half-truth. Yes, the faith we exercise is our faith. God does not do the believing for us. When I respond to Christ, it is my response, my faith, my trust that is being exercised. The issue, however, goes deeper. The question still remains: "Do I cooperate with God's grace before I am born again, or does the cooperation occur after?" Another way of asking this question is to ask if regeneration is monergistic or synergistic. Is it operative or cooperative? Is it effectual or dependent? Some of these words are theological terms that require further explanation.

A monergistic work is a work produced singly, by one person. The prefix mono means one. The word erg refers to a unit of work. Words like energy are built upon this root. A synergistic work is one that involves cooperation between two or more persons or things. The prefix syn -

means "together with." I labor this distinction for a reason. The debate between Rome and Luther hung on this single point. At issue was this: Is regeneration a monergistic work of God or a synergistic work that requires cooperation between man and God? When my professor wrote "Regeneration precedes faith" on the blackboard, he was clearly siding with the monergistic answer. After a person is regenerated, that person cooperates by exercising faith and trust. But the first step is the work of God and of God alone.

The reason we do not cooperate with regenerating grace before it acts upon us and in us is because we can- not. We cannot because we are spiritually dead. We can no more assist the Holy Spirit in the quickening of our souls to spiritual life than Lazarus could help Jesus raise him for the dead.

When I began to wrestle with the Professor's argument, I was surprised to learn that his strange-sounding teaching was not novel. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield - even the great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas taught this doctrine. Thomas Aquinas is the Doctor Angelicus of the Roman Catholic Church. For centuries his theological teaching was accepted as official dogma by most Catholics. So he was the last person I expected to hold such a view of regeneration. Yet Aquinas insisted that regenerating grace is operative grace, not cooperative grace. Aquinas spoke of prevenient grace, but he spoke of a grace that comes

before faith, which is regeneration.

These giants of Christian history derived their view from Holy Scripture. The key phrase in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians is this: "...even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace have you been saved)" (Eph. 2:5). Here Paul locates the time when regeneration occurs. It takes place 'when we were dead.' With one thunderbolt of apostolic revelation all attempts to give the initiative in regeneration to man are smashed. Again, dead men do not cooperate with grace. Unless regeneration takes place first, there is no possibility of faith.

This says nothing different from what Jesus said to Nicodemus. Unless a man is born again first, he cannot possibly see or enter the kingdom of God. If we believe that faith precedes regeneration, then we set our thinking and therefore ourselves in direct opposition not only to giants of Christian history but also to the teaching of Paul and of our Lord Himself.

(Excerpt from the book, The Mystery of the Holy Spirit, by R.C. Sproul, Christian Focus

For more on this topic see:

The New Genesis by R.C. Sproul
Monergism vs. Synergism by John Hendryx
A Defense of Monergistic Regeneration by Gannon Murphy
Regeneration by Asahel Nettleton

My Comment:
Another passages in the Bible clearly teaches that regeneration preceeds faith see:
1 John 5:1 - "everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God", John 1:13, Rom 9:16

John 6:63,65 "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life... Therefore have I told you that no man can come to me, unless it be given to him by my Father."

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